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ABSTRACT

Realizing that communications theory and research have little to do with organizational life, a communications scholar decided to become an organizational participant while still analyzing events and episodes in a scholarly way. In the spring of 1986, he joined the board of directors of Interface Precision Benchworks (IPB), a not-for-profit company whose mission was to demonstrate that all humans, even those with the most severe mental and physical difficulties, are capable of a fully functioning life if given the proper support. During the time the communications scholar was on the board, IPB decided to forget the benchmark model and changed to a for-profit, employee-owned business consisting of electronic assembly contractors making computer interface cables. The company used marketplace criteria as the definition of successful performance. Through the use of team management, team production, and statistical control processes, IPB achieved zero defects and on-time delivery. Lessons learned from this experience are: (1) a remarkable uniformity of product can result from widely diverse processes; (2) ethics and values are central to the decision-making processes at IPB--the people at IPB really care about other people and still get a job done; (3) organizational theorists and practitioners err when they use labels for people which attribute systemic effects to individuals; and (4) organizational scholars and practitioners alike need to move away from linear, reductionist language when describing organizational activities, toward a more process perspective. By reflecting on actual organizational practices such as the ones at IPB, communication scholars can begin to forge the link between theory and lived experience. (RS)

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ON ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE:

SOME LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SEVERELY MENTALLY "DISABLED"

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ON ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE:

SOME LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SEVERELY MENTALLY "DISABLED"

In the spring of 1976 I was finishing my undergraduate degree and was in my fourth year of management. At the time I was managing a private country club and taking the necessary courses to fulfill the requirements for a minor in General Business Administration. As I struggled to link my own experiences as a manager with the material we covered in my management courses, I was continually frustrated. The theory and research that my professor was citing as the basis for a course of action in business bore little relationship to the complexities of my position as manager. At that point, my experience led me to believe that organizational scholarship and the conduct of organizational affairs had little to do with one another.

I decided to pursue a graduate degree in communication, not because I believed that academe had much to offer me as a manager but rather because I wanted to continue to participate in collegiate debate. Eventually, I grew tired of debate and turned to the academic study of work processes, better known in our field at the time as "organizational communication." Armed with all of the information in this area that I had gleaned from my years of graduate study, I set out to convey this body of scholarly knowledge to the uninformed masses (uninformed because

they did not study the topic but rather only lived it). Of course, it occurred to me fairly quickly that now I was the somewhat myopic professor in front of the classroom talking about theory and research that have little to do with organizational life. At this point, my experience as a scholar confirmed what I had only suspected as an undergraduate - with one caveat. While theory and research generally have little to do with organizational life, this need not be the case. I also discovered that I am not alone in the recognition of this problematic or the reasons for it existence. H.L. Goodall made similar observations when describing his own experience "...I gradually learned that what constituted communication in organizations did not correspond very much to what I was reading in and contributing to scholarly journals. ...[A]mong scholars of organizational culture there was a rapidly expanding entropic universe of theoretical discourse without much fieldwork to support it. ...[W]e were becoming...users of an elaborate language code that didn't work at work" (1989, p. xi).

For some the response to this issue is to go on with their work and argue, at least implicitly, that life is not important when it comes to good communication research. For others, such as Goodall, this realization means altering the nature of the scholarly act to attempt a rendering of organizational life which is grounded in the experience of organizational actors. For me,

it is back to my roots, spending my time as an organizational participant and attempting to analyze events and episodes in a scholarly way. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on this experience as a means of fostering dialogue about a language code that works at work.

While all of my work experiences inform my thinking and practice at any given moment, of particular importance is my involvement with people labeled "disabled." I have worked in and/or with several organizations whose principle concern is the creation of meaningful employment opportunities (in a social and economic sense) for people with the most severe disabilities. These are particularly challenging and enlightening people to work with because you spend a good deal time doing the "impossible." It is at the juncture of this contradiction that one sees most clearly the chasm between most scholarship and organizational life. Most severely mentally disabled are labeled and locked away because, according to our best social science theory as practiced by psychiatrists and psychologists, they are not supposed to be able to perform everyday activities, especially productive work. From my experience this thinking is not only wrong-headed, it is inhumane. In demonstrating this, as detailed below, we not only liberate people held against their will, we learn a little about organizational theory as well. I first became involved in this area of human affairs when I was

asked to join the Board of Directors of Interface Precision Benchworks, Inc.(I.P.B.) in 1986. This paper is about I.P.B., the art of doing the impossible, and some observations about creating a language code that works at work.

I.P.B.

Interface Precision Benchworks Inc. was founded in 1984 as a not-for-profit organization whose mission was to demonstrate the efficacy of the "Benchwork Model" of supported employment as designed by researchers at the University of Oregon. The idea was to demonstrate that all humans, even those with the most severe mental and physical difficulties are capable of a fully functioning life if given the proper opportunities and supports. From a social science, not to mention a conventional wisdom point of view, these people were considered radical- and a little crazy!

Many of the new employees at I.P.B. had never seen the outside of a state institution. Most, if not all, had no idea what others meant by such ordinary terms as money, paycheck, break, work, or productivity. These people, armed with a few trainers and a manager, set out to face the global economy. By early 1985, they were broke and without a manager. A new manager, a Cuban woman with a good deal of human services experience but little business background, was hired. I met the

manager in January 1986 at a social gathering. Over the next few months, we developed what continues to be a close friendship. Part of our developing friendship revolved around a common interest in the development of organizations that are economically successful and at the same time enriching to those who work in that organization. In the spring of 1986, she and the board of directors asked me to join the board, in part for my managerial knowledge and in part for my human values.

By early 1987, we had lost two board members, gained two new members (for a total of four), and I found myself in the presidency where I stayed until September of 1990. I.P.B. continues to exist, with both new board members and a new manager. During the time I was on the board, I.P.B. underwent some major changes which offer some useful lessons. We decided to forget the benchwork model and focus our energies on becoming a for-profit, employee-owned business. (We became electronic assembly contractors making computer interface cables.) As such, we began to use marketplace criteria as the definition of successful performance. Importantly, we intended to achieve a rightful place in a competitive economy without sacrificing our fundamental values which I have since learned to label as celebrating diversity and the empowerment of people to manage their own affairs.

As a business we made progress toward most of our goals. From 1985 to 1989 we reduced public revenues (embodied in a contract we had with the state to offer services to those labeled disabled) from 88% to 12% of gross intake. Commercial sales went from $10,000 a year to $750,000 in the same period. This represents substantial growth for a small business of any sort. This growth caused a tripling of the number of employees and a move to a new factory. By 1990 the organization had nearly 45 members, 12 of whom carried the label disabled; everyone else was drawn from the community. Most of these employees had no prior training or relationship with the severely mentally "disabled" and each had their own set of problems.

We endured, as did most U.S. companies in the 1980's, the constant threat to our business from global competition. At various points competitors from Mexico and China nearly took our business, but for the most part, they did not. Why not? In part, they were unsuccessful due to the strong relationship we maintained with our customers, but more importantly we offered a quality product at a competitive price. Through the use of team management, team production and statistical process control we achieved 0 defects and on-time delivery. These are performance standards anyone can match but no one can beat. In short, I.P.B. earned a place in the global economy because it manufactured to world class standards.

To summarize, with no background in business, electronics, engineering or in some cases even the concept of a job, the employees of I.P.B. managed under entrepreneurial and rapid growth conditions to accomplish what many other U.S. organizations seem unable to do, deliver 0 defects on-time. This was not accomplished without some luck, hard work, dissension and and the other conditions associated with the conduct of business. It was also not achieved without design. We deliberately set out to be different than most organizations. In essence, we intended to out-perform our competitors in the marketplace, and in the process, to empower our people in the workplace. We gave, and I.P.B. continues to give, a credible performance.

SOME LESSONS I LEARNED AT I.P.B.

Having an opportunity to help structure and navigate organizational processes proved to be highly educational. One of the most basic lessons I experienced has to do with what "counts as" organization. Historically, bureaucracy and organization have been nearly synonymous. As Ferguson states: "An investigation of bureaucracy--what it is, how it is talked about, by whom, for what purpose, at whose expense--becomes an investigation of both organizational structures and organizational discourse. ...[I]n contemporary society, the dominant form of linguistic practice is that of bureaucratic discourse" (1984, p.7). This created a

twofold problem for us. First, almost no one possessed any language for organizing that was not bureaucratic. Second, for our purposes bureaucratic discourse was, for the most part, dysfunctional. Unfortunately, much of our theory, research and practice immerses our society in a sea of bureaucratic talk, leading people to bureaucratic ways of doing things even if they deliberately set out to do something different. One of the biggest hurdles to overcome is teaching people from one end of the organization to the other to speak a different language of organizing.

To cope with this issue I suggest reconceptualizing our organizational continuum. In bureaucratic discourse we move from uniform (organized) to chaos (disorganized). Bureaucracies engage in a variety of processes to attain the goal of uniformity including but not limited to authority, rules, compartmentalization, more authority, and more rules. Most of these processes are a waste of time and money at best, and in the worst case are actually counterproductive. More importantly, we have a large and growing body of literature attesting to the inhumanity of bureaucracy.

My acquaintance with the employees of I.P.B. led to an interesting discovery for me. Their biggest disability is their inability to look and engage in behavior that is uniform. In other words, because the rest of us did not know how to force

them into good bureaucratic citizenship, we took away their rights and threw away the key until someone came along and challenged the system.

Questioning the status quo is one thing, developing an alternative is another. Perhaps we could recast the old continuum into two new ones: Uniform-----Diverse and Organized-----Disorganized. The first continuum, in its entirety, may exist anywhere along the second. In other words, diversity and uniformity can be the basis for organization as well as disorganization. When people categorized as severely mentally retarded are trained to do a task, both the training and the means of task accomplishment need to be tailored to the individual. Thus a work environment may have several people accomplishing the same task but not by the same process or even with the same tooling. This approach, of course, can be extended to any other person as well. This diversity of training, task design, tooling and human performance is an anathema to traditional bureaucratic discourse. I would argue, however, that it is organized, thus the shift in continuum.

What we discovered at I.P.B. is that remarkable uniformity of product can result from widely diverse processes. Furthermore, this can be achieved consistently, over time with an effort toward constant improvement occurring simultaneously. The market performance of I.P.B. suggests that diversity as a basis

for conceptualizing organization is a practical and viable alternative to uniformity. Exploring the myriad of research questions that this conceptualization gives rise to may help us in developing a language code for work that works, without dehumanizing people in the process.

A second lesson I draw from this situation has to do with ethics. Everybody agrees that they are important, but nobody seems to want to make them a central concern of organizing processes research. Even business schools tend to stay away from the subject or treat it as a topic best left to an elective course that most students will never take. Our primary concern for board membership, management and worker alike centered around values. Perhaps I might have learned to appreciate the centrality of values in another setting, but nowhere in my experience have they been as central to organizational decision making as at I.P.B..

People really can care about other people and still get a job done. Above all else we tried to develop a caring approach to coworkers, especially those labeled disabled. When I left we had some distance to go, but we had made a great deal of progress. Data collected in the spring of 1990 clearly suggest that while every employee did not necessarily appreciate all of their fellow employees, everyone had a deep and abiding concern

for those labeled disabled (Ferraris, Carveth, Parrish Sprowl 1991). This concern for others improved training practices and team performance. It also seemed to impact upon work performance in general. It made for generally good esprit de corps even when people were dissatisfied with some issue.

All of this suggests to me that Gilligan's notion of ethic of care is probably more consistent with good team performance than ethic of justice (Gilligan, 1982). Keep in mind that I, like Gilligan, am using these terms as organizing principles for modes of thought and practice, not as definitive categories. These concepts are well-detailed elsewhere (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Ward and Taylor, 1988) but suffice it to say that bureaucratic structures assume ethic of justice in organizational dealings and ethic of care is often thought to be more appropriate in the domestic sphere than in the world of work.

Arguments that stress the importance of making this ethical transformation are beginning to find space in Business journals. In two successive issues of the Harvard Business Review, Editor Rosabeth Moss Kanter emphasizes the importance of making connections when she notes that "Competing successfully in the future will depend on bringing together, not separating, the strategic and the social" (1990a, p.8), and "What matters most today is the ability to think together, not alone" (1990b, p.10). While Kanter does not directly link this to an ethic of care I

think the relationship is clear. Certainly any organization that hopes to encourage and develop a culturally diverse workforce in a competitive environment needs to explore the ethics of organizational relationships if they hope to cope with the complexities of difference, and I believe the concept of the ethic of care can be heuristically valuable in that regard.

Lesson three gleaned from my life at I.P.B. is that organizational theorists and practitioners alike err when they use labels for people which attribute systemic effects to individuals. We frequently label people "work disabled" as if it is something about the individual alone that creates the work disability. Yet clearly the people and the environment in which a person lives has more to do with the inadequacies we attribute to the person labeled work disabled than their physiology. As Russo and Jansen (1988) point out "In evaluating the available data on work disability, it is important to keep in mind that work disability is defined as an outcome of physical or mental impairment. Work disability is considered to be present if normal work activity is prevented or limited. This definition deemphasizes the physiological and focuses on the economic, sociological, and psychological aspects of the disability. The demands of the work environment are as much, if not more, influential as type and level of actual physical impairment in defining work disability" (1988, p.230).

Work environments, including building design, floor layout, workspace design, tool design, policy and relationships can be adapted to accommodate nearly any level of physical and mental ability. We have done it. It works. So why are people "disabled?" Because we label people and write them off rather than asking ourselves and others how we might construct more inviting work sites. In other words, what tends to get a person labeled disabled is not their physical and mental abilities, but the words and actions of those around them. It is others that create the largest disability for an impaired person, but because they appear normal we allow them to hide their incompetence in the label placed on someone else.

This type of labeling is inhumane and counterproductive. Millions of people routinely have their rights denied because of this type of language. Millions of others get more than their fair share because because of such labeling. Pay in this country for upper management is 32 times greater than the average worker. In Japan the ratio is 7 to 1. Why do our "leaders" get so much? Mostly because our ability to attribute to them far greater ability than one person can possess allows them an overstated sense of importance. No leader can lead without followers. No leader can lead unless the competition makes decisions that cause them to follow. No one gets anywhere by themselves. We all have our own set of abilities and disabilities, a set which changes

depending upon who we are in relation to at the moment.

Organizational scholars and practitioners alike need to move away from linear, reductionistic language when describing organizational activities, toward a more process perspective. While in general, this is not a unique theoretical argument, at least not in our discipline, it is rarely linked to actual organizational practice. What is important in this instance is to recognize that when an organization rejects the boundaries created by static language, people seem to instantly acquire new abilities. At I.P.B. the "disabled" became "abled" primarily because of this shift in perspective. For example, we not only had people who were not supposed to be able to do anything working at full production, sometimes a "disabled" person would demonstrate ways of doing a task to new employees who carried no such label. When these types of actions occur one cannot help but think that a more widespread attempt to engage in process thinking and talking would enable all people in ways we had never thought possible.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion is not intended to suggest that I.P.B. is an "excellent" organization, in the Peters and Waterman sense. As Peters himself points out in Thriving On Chaos, "There are no excellent companies" (1987, p.3). I.P.B. is not particularly noteworthy in its ability to sustain a position in the

competitive marketplace. Thousands of companies do that. What is interesting about I.P.B. is its attention to organizing processes and its concomitant desire to empower employees. The fact that it works and is different at the same time is what makes it worthy of our attention.

By reflecting on actual organizational practices such as these, I think we begin to forge the link between between theory and lived experience. The lessons learned, as outlined above, are not meant to be final statements but rather, as suggested at the beginning, points around which a dialogue about a language of work that works may be generated. In part, this dialogue ought to help us confront the ways and means of scholarly practice, including both pedagogy and research, in relation to organizational life. For example, although communication scholars are usually housed in the college of arts and sciences and not business, they still need to be attentive to the exigencies of the organizations they research. In our country this means paying some attention to the demands of the marketplace. We should not inflict training and development programs on organizations that have more to do with what we learned in social science writings than with what it takes for an organization to thrive and prosper in a competitive environment. By implication of course, this also suggests that social science

writings about the operation of organizations ought to bear more of a relationship to actual human behavior in those organizations.

Perhaps there is another lesson to be learned here. We might better link theory and practice if scholars did more fieldwork, including organizational participation not meant specifically as "research" (in the formal sense of the term). In fieldwork, the scholar intent upon "research" still maintains a stance removed from the researched. Ultimately I believe that something is to be gained from engaging in the "real" thing. Most practicing organizational actors outside of academe with whom I am acquainted have little regard for much scholarship. Perhaps if scholars varied their mode of participation in organizations, they too would begin to see the problems with much existing organizational scholarship. Much of what gets written might not be. Much of what is not written, might be.

In 1976, despite my four years in management, I had very little knowledge of or contact with organizational research. What little I did know seemed to have little to do with my job. By the end of 1983, Ph.D. in hand, I had acquired a great deal of knowledge about organizational research and still did not understand what it all had to do with organizing practices. Later, I confirmed what I had long suspected, the relationship was scant at best. They ought to be linked and can be linked if

take this mission seriously. We can begin by expanding our notion of what "counts as" scholarly activity. This should include both research, fieldwork, and lived organizational experience. By expanding our scholarly modalities, we may encourage people to make connections that will not only enlighten but empower as well.

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